

“Jesus, Teilhard de Chardin and Community...”

26/8/18

I speak in the name of Jesus the Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit, to the glory of God the Father.

Amen.

I am who I am because I am in you...

During my third year of studying at Rhodes University, we were introduced to Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. Professor Felicity Edwards included some of Teilhard de Chardin’s writings in our Systematic Theology 3 course work. Some of his work has always struck a chord with me and I would like to spend a moment this evening having a look at what he had to say.

de Chardin was born in 1881 and died in 1955. He was a French idealist, philosopher and a Jesuit priest who trained as a palaeontologist and geologist. He also took part in the recovery of Peking Man. de Chardin is often cited for conceiving the vitalist idea of the Omega Point. (For those of you unfamiliar with the concept, this is the idea that there is a maximum level of complexity and consciousness towards which the universe is evolving).

de Chardin has two comprehensive works which are “The Phenomenon of Man” and “The Divine Milieu”. He believed in the theory of evolution and developed complex philosophical arguments around the idea. de Chardin perhaps could be best summed up with the statements that, “...everything is the sum of the past...” and “nothing is comprehensible except through its history...”.

I am who I am because I am in you...

de Chardin believed that Christ not only has a mystical dimension, but a physical dimension too. He suggests that Christ is the “One” holding everything together. Christ provides the stability, as we move towards an eschatological end. Christ is therefore the unifying centre of the universe and its goal.

I am who I am because I am in you...

Many theologians have suggested that little is known about this Jesuit priest and his refreshing understanding of spirituality.

In brief, de Chardin's approach to spirituality could be summarised as follows:

- 1) de Chardin proposes that Christian spirituality can embrace and love both God AND the world. (The one does not surpass the other)
- 2) As opposed to believing in either a transcendent (far away in heaven) or an immanent (within your heart) God, de Chardin suggests a third way where God is the One in whom we live and move and have our being. Interestingly, this idea was recognised in ancient times but never formalised by modern religions.
- 3) de Chardin embraces and accepts modern science. (Perhaps read my sermon entitled, "Jesus, Adam and the issue of Lucy...")
- 4) de Chardin believed that our personal relationship with God expands to become part of the grand project envisioned by God for humanity.
- 5) de Chardin also believed that all of our human efforts help to create a better world and they also contribute towards God's planetary project.
- 6) Teilhard goes on to suggest how to understand and handle suffering, enrich personal life, as well an expanded view on the Eucharist.

What has always stood out for me since 1987 are the words that I read one day, "I am who I am because I am in you..."

These words have somehow stuck inside my head and heart for close on thirty-one years now. They seem simple but the moment you take some time to reflect on this seemingly simple sentence, you are struck with the deep beauty and symbolism that they represent.

I am who I am because I am in you.

This statement can be unpacked in so many different ways...

For example, I am who I am because I am in Jesus. Jesus is the centre of our salvation story. He died for us so that we might experience eternal life. By drinking from the cup of sorrow, as Henri Nouwen put it so succinctly, Jesus took on the sorrows of the world and in one powerful step provided an opportunity for humankind to be part of God's plan. So, in essence, when we partake of the Eucharist, we are accepting Jesus into our bodies and lives so that He literally lives within us and us within Him. (This places a whole new slant on the debate of consubstantiation vs transubstantiation, but this is a sermon topic for another day)

I am who I am because Jesus lives in me and I live in Jesus.

Secondly, I am who I am because I am in you, the Body of Christ. When I participate in the Church of God, in all its various dimensions and facets, I am building my life with you and in you. They cannot be separated. We are one. We travel this journey of faith as Christians, together. Therefore, as we travel along we are in each other. This is a powerful statement. It takes time to understand and appreciate. We cannot and should not ever be Christians alone and separate. This is not what Christianity is about. It is literally about being in one another, for this is how Jesus lives in us, by us being in one another.

I am who I am because I am in you...

These complex, but essential ideas also raise interesting ideas about community...

Let us for a moment decolonise de Chardin's idea of community and you will find the term Ubuntu already present in our society.

Ubuntu, a South African theme that believes in building community together, says, "I am because you are..."

Ubuntu is so important during this time when our nation is so divided. Ubuntu emphasizes, much like de Chardin, that humans cannot exist in isolation. We depend on connection, community and caring. Tutu builds on the idea of Ubuntu by saying, "My humanity is bound up in yours, for we can only be human together." By this, Tutu means that the potential of human beings working collectively to achieve goals is infinitely greater than the potential of any individual.

Mandela is also quoted as saying the following in 2006...

“A traveler through a country would stop at a village and he didn’t have to ask for food or for water. Once he stops, the people give him food, entertain him. That is one aspect of Ubuntu, but it will have various aspects. Ubuntu does not mean that people should not enrich themselves. The question therefore is: Are you going to do so in order to enable the community around you to be able to improve?”

de Chardin may well have been writing ahead of his time but there has never been more of a time when the words, “I am who I am because I am in you,” have not been so important or vital to the growth of our country, both physically and spiritually.

I am who I am because I am in you.

You are who you are because you are in me.

I am who I am because I am in Jesus.

We are who we are because we are in each other.

I would like to close off this evening with a quote from de Chardin:

“Love alone is capable of uniting living beings in such a way as to complete and fulfill them, for it alone takes them and joins them by what is deepest in themselves.”

May God bless you this week ahead as you reflect on these powerful words.

Amen.